

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



April Stone Dahl is reviving the art of black ash basketry on the Bad River Ojibwe reservation. Having found no one else at Bad River who is actively making such baskets, she searched and found evidence of past activity: “An elder who has two baskets that are over 100 years old in his private collection, an elder pounding for his auntie when he was 16, a photo of a basket sitting on the porch behind my grandmother holding her toddler.

Black ash basketry is practiced in every direction around where I live in northern Wisconsin so I can only imagine it took place here, too.”

Without direct mentorship, April is largely self-taught in this art. In 1998, she began observing how a black ash basket made by her husband Jarrod changed color and shifted with use. Fascinated, she asked Jarrod to show her how to weave with black ash. She spent the next year learning about the material through the weaving process, impressed by its strength and durability. By 2000, a community member asked her to share what she had learned; April has since taught at least 800 people through classes and workshops. She teaches the entire process: identifying a black ash tree in its swamp environment, harvesting the tree, preparing the splints by pounding the log to separate the growth rings, peeling off each layer from the log, scraping clean the splint, dividing, grading and cutting the splints into lengths, and then weaving.

One of the people April instructed was her apprentice, Jenny Morris. Two values that April stressed was using locally sourced materials and producing a utilitarian basket ready to be used in everyday life. The two harvested and prepared black ash and then wove dozens of baskets. They ended the year with two public presentations, one in Ashland and the other in Bad River, with inspiring feedback from community members. During the year-long apprenticeship, Jenny kept notes in an on-line blog, marking the each learning step and ending with this, “...the experiences I gained from such a unique opportunity have proven to be priceless. It has been an incredible lesson in patience, diligence, and attention to detail.”

Born in 1971 in Cook County, Illinois, April returned to her ancestral home on the south shore of Lake Superior as an infant. A member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (Ojibwe), she now lives on the reservation with her husband, Jarrod, and their four children. In 2000, she and Jarrod founded the business Woodspirit, dedicated to creating by hand objects originating in earlier times and meant to be used today.

“Weaving black ash baskets has made a difference for me in my life, and also for the community.” April Stone Dahl